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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the importance of involving foster youth speak for themselves, particularly about what they need and deserve as they prepare to move out of the foster care system. Descriptions of innovative and effective programs and legislation that encourage leadership skills in foster children are included, such as the California Youth Connection, Youth Grow Nebraska, and tuition waiver models. Includes a table of leading state programs. (GCP)

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Fostering Leadership

by

Susan Kellam

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CONNECT FOR KIDS
Guidance For Grown-ups

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Fostering Leadership

by Susan Kellam

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When Mary Furnas, coordinator of Nebraska's independent living program for foster youth, gave a group of teenaged foster children a bundle of theatrical props and asked them to act out a bad day in court—something nearly every foster child experiences—she discovered that these young people had a lot to say to and about the powers that loom so large in their lives.

"Basically I gave them a roomful of junk," says Furnas, whose job it is to prepare foster youth in Nebraska to "age out" of care as they reach age 18. And the young thespians amazed her with the characters they became in their makeshift costumes. "One young man, dressed up as a lawyer, kept whining about 'an important golf date in five minutes.' A *guardian ad litem* burst into tears in front of the judge." In general, she says, the vignettes and scenarios were right on target.

"A positive leader is someone who reinforces your ideas and your dreams and your hopes."
- Anna Korb, 18

This was ten years ago. "That's when I decided it was imperative to have youth speak for themselves," Furnas says, about what they need and deserve as they prepare to move out of the foster care system. She has subsequently involved foster teenagers in nearly every way possible, from decision-making to employing them in her office as grant writers to involving them in entrepreneurial experiences.

Most important, the young people are learning how to be positive leaders. One Nebraska teenager explains that she has known too many negative leaders. Anna Korb describes these negative leaders as leading youth "into things like drugs, things they shouldn't be doing." Korb, 18, is a ward of the state because drug use led her astray.

Now she's learning about positive leaders. In Korb's words, "a positive leader is someone who reinforces your ideas and your dreams and your hopes. They lead toward the things that kids should be going toward."

California Youth Connection and Beyond

Many child advocates applaud The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 for requiring that youth "participate directly in designing their own program activities that prepare them for independent living." In many ways, the new law confirms what is already happening across the country.

California Youth Connection is a pioneer in this area: the first chapters began meeting in 1988. CYC modeled their early efforts after the Canadian Youth in Care Network, which featured strong localized efforts to organize foster youth to advocate for their rights. "We've surpassed the Canadian model now," boasts Janet Knipe, CYC statewide coordinator.

Knipe found that many policy makers and administrators had not spent much time talking to foster youth. She worked to change that. "Now it's the youth who are speaking up and articulating their ideas or their concerns and coming up with their own policy recommendations. It's an opportunity for us to hear from a previously unheard constituency. Our role as adults is to maximize the opportunity for young people to express themselves,"

she says.

"[Getting involved] made me realize that what I had to say was valid ... that the problems in my home weren't my fault."
- Alfred Perez, 22

Alfred Perez, now 22 and a graduate student at the University of Michigan, says that "getting involved with the California Youth Connection made me realize that what I had to say was valid. I got to testify in front of the state Human Services Committee when I was 17. Those sorts of things empowered me and made me realize that the problems in my home weren't my fault."

"I didn't even know we had a voice to talk," echoes Walika Cox, a 19-year old student. "The California Youth Connection taught me."

Many other states have taken the cue from California, forming state-funded youth advisory boards that give foster teenagers a forum for addressing policy makers and a broader public. (Click here to learn more about states programs.)

Youth Grow Nebraska

Nebraska's foster care youth board became incorporated into the Governor's Youth Advisory Council in 1993 after Mary Furnas argued that the council, with its unique ability to get the governor's attention on issues affecting young people, consisted only of elite youth. "None of them had ever seen a Omaha drive-by shooting," she says. Now the membership includes two teenagers in foster care, one in juvenile services, teen parents, an adopted teen, homeless youth, and a Native American youth.

Gov. Mike Johanns' recently described this multiracial, multiethnic group of 28 teenagers as "a representative voice for all Nebraska youth. That's important because there needs to be a balance of communication and collaboration between Nebraska's youth and the adults who are creating laws, policies, and initiatives that affect young people in our state."

The council members talk openly with Johanns about juvenile detention, foster care, parenthood, job training and other issues that affect their lives. At the teenagers' suggestion, Johanns has agreed to develop a web site, hot linked to the governor's web site, that will highlight the issues developed by the council.

In the very near future, some Nebraska license plates will read "Youth & Adults working Together Make Better Communities." The dollars spent to purchase these special plates will fund youth development initiatives at the community level.

Furnas says that the kids are engaged in other entrepreneurial activities, including a T-shirt with the slogan "Youth Grow Nebraska." They're also spurring media campaigns to change the way youth are looked at by their communities. And a new speaker's bureau on youth issues is becoming a data bank of young voices able to speak out on foster care, adoption, gangs, drugs and alcohol, mentoring and pending legislation.

There is also Furnas' own motto: Four Days, Four Kids, Four Pizzas. When deadlines approach for a grant application on any kind of youth-related activity, she brings in four kids to do most of the conceptualization and writing. Generally, she says, the work gets done during a consistent four-day stretch. Pizza—one a day—fuels the action. As she explains it, "The youth themselves are the best grant writers because they're innovative."

The Tuition Waiver Model

A determined group of foster youth in Texas has revolutionized the pathway to higher education for many kids in care. The young Texans proved their power as lobbyists in 1993 when they convinced both houses of the state legislature to overwhelmingly support a bill to waive tuition in the state university system for kids who are wards of the state, or recently emancipated. Then-governor Ann Richards signed the bill into law. Now many other states have passed similar legislation, or are in the process of doing so.

"This has really motivated many of the foster kids to finish high school because now they have the realistic hope of going on to college. Before, they didn't understand how they were going to do it," says Janet Luft, Texas' Independent Living Coordinator. "We've seen an increase in the number of our high school graduates as well as those going on to college."

The Texas story makes a powerful point for the leadership skills of foster youth...especially in light of the fact that the tuition waiver legislation initially failed in 1990, when the only people advocating for it with lawmakers were Child Protection Service staff. When the bill was reintroduced in 1993, as Luft explains, "this time the youth in care testified." Hearing the potential students themselves ask for the chance to go to college inspired the legislators to vote "yea" on the second go-round.

The state of Maryland passed a similar tuition waiver bill this year with only two opposing votes. Following the Texas model, all active lobbying was carried out by the young people with the most at stake.

"I never advocated for the bill myself," says Patrick Patrong, Maryland's Independent Living Coordinator. In fact, the Maryland Department of Human Resources didn't endorse the tuition waiver legislation until it had already been passed by the Senate and was being heard in a House committee. "At 12:15 for a 1 o'clock hearing, we were given the okay to support it," Patrong says.

Even the decision to request the legislation came from the foster youth. Patrong asked them at their 1999 Youth Initiative Summit to chose one major project. They overwhelmingly backed the tuition waiver concept.

Patrong worked with them on contacting legislators and explained how bills move through committees. He trained them in public speaking and letter-writing campaigns. A sponsoring senator even came to their Youth Advisory Board to ask what they wanted in the law.

"I only trained the board in leadership and development. They basically took it from there," he says.

Searching for Leaders

Janet Luft, with considerable experience empowering youth, rejects the notion that a teenager must exhibit specific leadership abilities to be an effective leader. She feels that many kids just need to be asked to take a leadership position. "When they see themselves as a role model," she says, "they live up to a higher standard."

Texas' Youth Leadership Committee, which grew out of the tuition waiver success, is a statewide youth advisory board that meets quarterly to discuss and make recommendations regarding youth in foster care. Luft says that she looks for kids who already participate actively with Preparation for Adult Living, or PAL, the state's Independent Living Program. She chooses the youth for the committee who show enthusiasm and a level of responsibility.

Being on the leadership committee will increase a youth's self-confidence and feeling of belonging, Luft reports. "They make dramatic changes during the time they're on the committee. Sometimes I'm not sure why someone got put on the panel. But I've found that if we look for their strengths, they will emerge."

Roger Lopez, a youth specialist with the Texas PAL program, argues that youth in foster care have the advantage over other teenagers when it comes to becoming good leaders. "Kids in care know themselves. And that's what makes a great leader," he says.

Lopez, 19, explains that he is often a spokesperson for youth at state policy meetings. "There're people who sit around a table who have no idea what it's like to be in foster care."

His role is to be able to say "Okay, I've been there and this is how that particular rule affected me."

For example, because of liability issues, children in care are carefully supervised in virtually all aspects of their lives, even after they become teenagers—a time when their peers who are not in care are experimenting with new levels of independence. "These kids never have any opportunity to make mistakes. When they emancipate at age 18, they're still babies. They've never really had a chance to do things," Lopez explains.

"I say, 'Let's try to let these youth have some responsibility first,'" he argues.

Lopez feels that he's often battling the negative image of teenagers. "It's not fair to put youth in one category. Not everyone wants to blow up a school with a bomb," he says. "Youth have a lot of energy. If it's positive energy, they can be a strong positive voice with a lot of energy behind it."

CWLA Carves the Model in Stone

Maria Garin Jones at the Child Welfare League of America is attempting to harness that youth energy to a powerful new national initiative for improving transitions to adulthood for young adults served by the foster care system.

"When people think about youth involvement, they think about how the youth should be at a meeting. I want youth involved because they can be a resource. Everyone can benefit in the long run," says Garin Jones.

Garin Jones is the adult voice, and project manager, on a new Youth Involvement Initiative that's closely associated with the National Foster Care Awareness Project. Terry Harrak, an alumna of the foster care system, is the actual project coordinator.

Harrak, 20, devised the idea last year while sitting at a meeting in Seattle with an impressive array of researchers and advocates. "Everyone is using these technical terms for what they think is best for youth. And I'm looking around, listening to all this talk of elaborate research, and I said, 'Stop! If you just bring kids here you won't have to spend so much money on research. Just ask them directly and get a whole lot better answer," she recalls.

"All these adults were trying to come up with a grand scheme and they were missing the easiest thing: Bring the youth on board," says Harrak.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is funding this initiative because they believe that young people must be integrally involved in shaping their futures. "We're hoping Maria and Terry will be a catalyst for enhancing—and making real—youth involvement in the five-year plans under the Foster Care Independence Act. We hope to get technical assistance out to the states if they're really going to use the young people in the implementation of the act," says Tamara Hill, program associate at Casey.

Hill is concerned that there is no existing national network of young adults in the foster care system and no technical assistance agency working explicitly with state child welfare agencies on how to develop youth leadership.

"We're learning a lot from our grant," she says. "We know that you need adult support and infrastructure. And we know that you can't just rely on the vocal youth advocates. We need to reach into all kinds of foster care settings where they have young adults that aren't as vocal."

Harrak and Garin Jones have actively recruited foster youth from many different situations to participate in working group sessions.

The messages already delivered from this working group are clear: Support those with hopes

and dreams. Help the standing, not just the fallen. Show young people a path to take to reach their goals, don't just hand them a ready-made solution.

Garin Jones, a former social worker, explains that "adults have a lot of power and they make a lot of decisions about young people. Most case managers don't have much time. They don't sit down with kids in care and say, 'what are your goals?'"

"We believe that in every young person there is potential for leadership. Especially with vulnerable young adults, a lot of the issues they've lived are so powerful and poignant," says Hill.

Leading State Programs

The effort to give young people in foster care a leadership role in developing the policies and programs that lead to independence is taking root in states across the country. Here are some examples:

- Youth in **Alabama** are currently being trained to deliver Independent Living skills training to other youth.
- **Arizona** is one of nine states participating in a Positive Youth Development effort.
- The statewide **Florida** Youth Advisory Board is working to secure computers and produce a statewide newsletter.
- **Georgia** sponsors a "day at the Capitol" for foster youth.
- Testimony from foster youth convinced the **Kansas** legislature to pass laws which allow the state to continue serving youth to the age of 21 while they work towards completion of high school, trade, or vocational school, college or while starting their first job.
- In **Kentucky**, a Youth Action Committee puts on presentations in conjunction with the annual Foster Parent Conference. Their presentation at the 1999 conference was video-taped and is now being edited for distribution as a training tool.
- The Youth Leadership Advisory Team in **Maine** has developed a website (www.ylat.usm.maine).
- **Massachusetts** foster youth are advocating in favor of legislative efforts to provide state tuition waivers for college.
- **Mississippi** supports a statewide teen advisory group called the Hope Forum.
- The **Missouri** State Youth Advisory Board has successfully pushed the state to increase appropriations for such items as clothing allowances for foster children.
- Youth Advocates for **New Mexico** work on public speaking, advocacy and drafting legislation.
- Independent Living Networks in **New York** sponsors an annual forum for youth to meet with a panel of key decision makers, including district commissioners, agency administrators and family court judges.
- **North Carolina's** advocacy group, Strong Able Youth Speaking Out, meet with the Governor and go to Washington to advocate for foster care youth.
- The **Oklahoma** Youth Advisory Board is active as a speaker's bureau and a training group. They have provided training to members of the Bar Association, medical school staff and contractors supervising apartment living.
- **South Carolina** created a youth advisory board in January called Go Out and Live Life.
- The **West Virginia** Transitional Living Youth Council offers youth in foster care the chance to become involved in issues affecting their lives.

Susan Kellam has an extensive 25-year career in journalism and social policy, including editorial positions at Rolling Stone magazine and Congressional Quarterly and as communications director at the American Public Welfare Association. She is currently a free-lance writer.

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